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SUBJECT: UN ENVOY PREVIEWS ARAFAT "ASCENSION" PROPOSAL

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel C. Kurtzer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary: UN Special Coordinator Terje Larsen reviewed for the Ambassador his recent exchanges with GOI, PA, Egyptian, and Jordanian officials on PM Sharon's disengagement plan, and laid out an idea for enticing Arafat's cooperation in combating terrorism by offering him an "elevated," ceremonial position, while devolving genuine power to the prime minister. Citing a "radical change" in the discourse about the Israeli-Palestinian situation, Larsen said, "Everyone is talking about how to get rid of Arafat." End Summary.

A Higher Calling for Arafat?

2. (C) In a March 19 meeting, Larsen previewed for the Ambassador a proposal for Arafat's "ascension" that Larsen will make at the upcoming Cairo meeting of Quartet envoys. Although he pegged the proposal's chances of success at "much less than 50 percent," he said he had not been able to come up with a better alternative. Larsen explained that the proposal is based on the assumption that, if Arafat feels excluded from the process by which Israel unilaterally disengages from Palestinian territories, and marginalized by the international community's "day after" efforts -- including a possible UNSCR in which Arafat would not figure -- it is certain that he will play a spoiler role, sowing further chaos. Based on conversations Larsen has had with a variety of European, Palestinian, and other Arab players (see below for further details), the UN envoy believes that there will be a "critical mass" to deliver an ultimatum to the PA Chairman, offering him international legitimacy for a genuine devolution of power -- "or else...." Larsen posited that the carrot of being welcomed worldwide as a rehabilitated leader would be enough to entice the PA Chairman to ascend to a purely ceremonial position, ceding all of his power to the prime minister.

Larsen Hears an Emerging Consensus

3. (C) In making his case, Larsen cited numerous conversations he has had with key players in recent weeks.

-- Larsen was animated about a "radical change" he perceives in the discourse about the Israeli-Palestinian situation. "Everyone," he said, "is talking about how to get rid of Arafat." For example, German Foreign Minister Fischer had opened his last conversation with Larsen by asking, "How can we get rid of (Arafat)?" Jordanian Foreign Minister Muasher, whom he had recently met in Amman, asked rhetorically, "What can we do about the Chairman?"

-- Larsen said the British were "on board" with his proposal, while the French were "kind of on board."

-- In Cairo this past week, Larsen had met with a variety of Egyptian leaders, including FM Maher, whom he described as "open-minded." Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa, reportedly speaking about the broader issue of Israeli disengagement, said, "If it's clean, we'd welcome it." Omar Sulayman, who had just returned from meeting with Arafat in Ramallah, characterized the tough message he had delivered to the Chairman: "Either take action against terror, or you will have to hand over all of your powers to Abu Ala'a." Sulayman reportedly took Larsen's point that Arafat must face explicit sanctions if he fails to deliver, but Larsen was not convinced that the "tough message" Sulayman delivered had gone that far.

-- Larsen had also recently met with Abu Mazen, and a number of his former ministers, who are currently staying at a villa in Amman. Abu Mazen reportedly responded positively to Larsen's proposal but suggested amending it to add a new position of vice president -- a position he envisioned himself as filling -- to act as a "buffer" between Arafat and the prime minister.

Although the Message is Muddled By Sycophants

14. (C) Meanwhile, Larsen said, Arafat advisors, such as Nabil Abu Rudeineh, Nabil Sha'ath, and Sa'eb Erakat, are not telling the Chairman the truth about how negatively he is perceived by the international community. Indeed, Abu Rudeineh has been encouraging Arafat to "hang in there." As a result, Arafat believes that, "if Qadhafi can be rehabilitated, so can he." Citing second-hand information, Larsen lamented that even Mohammed Dahlan, who "talks tough" about Arafat, tends to lose his resolve in the presence of the Chairman. Indeed, according to an account from the Palestinian Minister of Agriculture, who was in the recent meeting between Dahlan and Arafat, Dahlan had tried, at the beginning of the meeting to kiss Arafat's hand. Arafat reportedly pulled back his hand in that instance, but Dahlan succeeded in kissing it at two later points in the meeting.

15. (C) Noting that he would be the last person to argue against a process that would lead to an empowered prime minister, the Ambassador nonetheless expressed skepticism that Larsen's proposal would work. Pointing out that Arafat can still "buy" loyalty on the street, and that he still has at his command people who will perpetrate violence and terror, he doubted that Arafat would give up those assets without a fight. Moreover, it is not clear who is willing to fight Arafat, if/when it comes to that.

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KURTZER